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ABSTRACT

The Home Education Learning Project (Project HELP) of the Philadelphia Public Schools is described. Based on an earlier school district telephone answering service program (Dial-A-Teacher Assistance (DATA LINE), with input from students through surveys, the project was implemented in 1984 to assist students with homework questions. In the first year, Project HELP received 8,222 calls, and throughout the year, teachers answered an average of 97 calls per day during the afternoon and evening hours that the service was provided. More than half of the callers asked for help in mathematics. In the 1986-87 school year, Project HELP operated 127 evenings and received 16,528 calls, with an average of 130 calls taken each evening. Results of a survey of 263 contacts indicate that over 90% of the students considered that their questions had been adequately answered. Many callers were frequent users of the service; it was also found, however, that Hispanic and Asian students were underrepresented in proportion to their numbers. Increased promotion should encourage more students to use Project HELP, a service considered very worthwhile by users and teacher participants. (SLD)

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Project HELP - The Home Education Learning Project: A History and Analysis of A Telephone Assistance Program for Homework

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Project HELP - The Home Education Learning Project: A History and Analysis of a Telephone Assistance Program for Homework

Homework's role in learning has been studied extensively by researchers but little definitive information on the subject has emerged. Rickards (1982) reported that the major textbooks in educational psychology did not attend to homework despite its ubiquitous place in curricula through the world. Although the research surrounding homework is inconsistent, Rickards claimed that teachers ought to be aware of the findings in order to form their own judgments on the issue.

Rickards divided homework research into three categories: (1) nonexperimental research in the form of questionnaires and surveys, (2) experimental research and (3) personal opinions. Experimental research activities have been limited and more studies using appropriate procedures ought to be conducted.

Surveys have shown that parents and teachers support homework while students at all grade levels accept homework assignments as a required component of their education. However, the type of homework assigned has concerned educators and students. This concern seems to be grounded in individual differences among pupils. Or, teachers fail to account for such differences when making homework assignments. Differences among teachers, however, have not been followed in the literature.

Student reading ability may influence the type of homework assigned by a teacher as well as it's completion. Hence, this variable may be an important one for researchers to study. While reading specialists have advised against integrating reading and homework assignments, this division seems to be unwarranted if not impossible. Academic variables other than reading ability may affect homework completion but no studies based on these variables were found in the literature.

Rickards' findings were not isolated as he cited research which showed that similar results have emerged since Brook's study in 1916. Friesen (1978) discovered that students preferred to help plan their homework as opposed to simply receiving assignments from their teachers. Students were opposed to busy work and held the opinion that explanations of their homework assignments were important. Apparently, homework completed for its own sake has little value for those asked to do it.

Strang (1968, 1975) found that some homework was necessary for enrichment activities. In this dimension, homework ought to extend the students' classwork if it is going to play a meaningful role in learning. Students should be made aware of their homework's purpose and assignments linked to individual students' needs seem to be the most productive. Assignments, according to Strang, should be neither long nor involved and some class time should be devoted to initiating homework if maximum effectivesness is going to be achieved.

Goldstein (1960) examined 280 studies on homework and found that regular assignments were associated with superior academic achievement. Hedges (1964) did not follow Goldstein but Austin (1977), who examined homework studies in mathematics, Friesen (1979) and Hansen (1972) supported him. Taken with Rickards' findings on differences linked to student ability and grade level, it seems clear that additional research in this area is called for.

Ivascyn (1984) described the influence of homework assistance on six middle and junior high school students. The investigator used a focused interview to collect his information and found that homework assistance was a valuable component of the participants' educational experience. The participants' parents were apprehensive but their concern, despite their inability to help their children, was important. The inability to complete assignments joined by failure, itself, had a negative influence on the

participants' attitudes toward the subject studied, other subjects and schoolwork, overall. Completing assignments was linked to positive student attitudes toward schoolwork:

> Acquiring assistance at the time of experiencing difficulty was significantly important to the subjects. They were not satisfied with obtaining only correct answers; the subjects felt a strong desire to understand the solutions to the homework problems (p. 70).

Of the topics involved in the study, mathematics caused the most difficulty for the students. Fear and the potential for embarrassment discouraged the participants from asking questions in the classroom. Ivascyn concluded that homework assistance was important in terms of facilitating homework completion.

Wood (1984) described a homework assistance program in Jacksonville, Florida. Sponsored by the University of North Florida and the Duval County Public School System, the program was designed to help children complete their homework. Help With Homework Hotline telephones were manned by certified teachers enrolled in a University of North Florida course. An instructor conducted training sessions and supervised the teachers. The training focused on strategies designed to assist callers.

The program operated from 5:00 PM to 8:00 PM, Mondays through Thursdays. Each six to eight teacher team took calls one night a week. At least two elementary school teachers, one foreign language teacher and one secondary mathematics teacher sat on each team.

If all of the telephone lines were being used, an answering machine recorded additional incoming calls. These calls were returned on a special call-back line. Thus, each caller received a response from a team member. In addition, a telephone line for the hearing impaired was available. On the average, 130 calls per evening were taken.

The Help with Homework Hotline was considered to be successful and led to the creation of the School Based Homework Assistance program. Here, certain schools were identified as Homework Assistance Centers and the program operated in each schools' media center. These centers offered individual assistance and operated two days a week for two hours each day.

Wood claimed that tangible results could be seen through increased use of the service from one year to the next. This position assumed that users were able to complete their homework. Unfortunately, Wood failed to include data designed to support this point.

Drossner (1987) attended to the relationship between homework and academic achievement in his comprehensive literature review. By a thorough examination of this relationship, Drossner identified an important issue, the relationship between a homework assignment's relevance and academic achievement. Students who do not understand the rationale for a homework assignment or who are unable to determine what they are supposed to do may not be able to complete their work. Therefore, homework becomes irrelevant. Teachers may be able to insure relevance by ascertaining that homework assignments are clear and to the point. Apparently, some teachers are not following through on their homework assignments because the School District of Philadelphia's Home Education Learning Project (Project HELP) teachers reported that some callers' questions point toward confusion rather than an inability to locate sources of information.

Homework plays an important role in today's schools as teachers use it to extend their lessons, prepare students for their upcoming learning activities, and enrich their instructional programs. These activities have been examined in the literature surrounding homework. While this body of literature has shown that homework assignments are probably beneficial for students, this conclusion must be qualified because of the lack of

experimental research in the area. One aspect of this research lies in the case of homework which may be too difficult for students to complete without professional assistance, a concern which may be resolved by using the telephone. The School District of Philadelphia's Home Education Learning Project (Project HELP) uses this approach to permit students to discuss their homework difficulties with certified teachers.

> Project HELP evolved from an earlier school district program named Dial-A-Teacher Assistance (DATA LINE), "a telephone answering service designed to 1) respond to parents or pupils' questions related to schoolwork or homework, 2) respond to parents' requests for information about the Parent Partnership Program, and 3) receive and respond to questions related to areas of parental concern" (Federal Evaluation Resources Services Title IV-C Report, 1980, p. 31).

DATA LINE was established by the Superintendent of Schools in 1979. After attending community meetings across the city, the Superintendent found that parents wanted two programs: one to help their help their children finish their homework and another to learn about all School District programs. The Superintendent responded to the parents' needs by initiating DATA LINE.

On January 10, 1979, a planning committee met in order to set up DATA LINE. This committee included representatives from the various curriculum offices, support units and the community. The committee recommended that DATA LINE operate from 5:30 PM to 8:30 PM on Mondays through Thursdays when school was in session. Initially, two teams of eight teachers which would work two nights a week. Adjustments to the operating and staffing patterns could be made in response to call volume. Teachers would be trained in a pair of two hour sessions where DATA LINE's policies and procedures would be explained.

The suggestions were followed and DATA LINE began operations February 12, 1979 under a series of guidelines suggested by the planning committee. First, callers would be asked not to mention their teachers' names or their school. Second, DATA LINE teachers would not provide direct answers to callers'

questions: They would help callers locate sources of information, clarify their assignments, suggest supplementary materials and link their suggestions to curricular offerings. DATA LINE operated for sixty-five evenings and received 7,774 calls, an average of 120 calls per evening. Table 1 appears on page 16 and shows relevant information for each year.

Supervisory personnel handled the telephone lines at first. Later, teachers selected through an examination were assigned to a DATA LINE team. This strategy permitted rapid implementation while an appropriate selection process was set up. More than one hundred teachers applied for the DATA LINE positions and those who were selected attended the two specified training sessions.

DATA LINE was publicized by printing its telephone number on students' report cards, distributing posters to the schools with information on DATA LINE, mailing flyers describing DATA LINE's services with telephone bills, radio announcements and talks by school personnel. Conceived as a component of the School District's Parent Partnership Program, DATA LINE was believed to be the first telephone homework assistance program established in the United States. Requests for information on setting up similar programs were made by educators from nearly all of the states and a number of foreign countries, including Tasmania.

Stories on DATA LINE appeared in the Wall Street Journal and Newsweek as well as numerous local publications. Radio and television programs in more than one hundred cities described DATA LINE's services (Newsletter, Office of Federal Programs, ESEA Title IV-C, School District of Philadelphia, June, 1979, p. 3-4).

DATA LINE provided service for 136 evenings over thirty-seven weeks in its first full school year of operation, 1979-80. During this year, DATA LINE received 26,645 calls, an average of 200 calls per evening. Service was

provided in Spanish in order to address the needs of the School District's Hispanic student population.

An extensive publicity program took place through the course of the 1979-80 school year. Announcements accompanied the September and October Bell Telephone bills and radio spots were aired in December and January. Television announcements were made during the early part of the school year and DATA LINE was featured on Evening Magazine, a national television program with a considerable amount of local programming. In the spring, the Superintendent mailed a letter describing DATA LINE to students' parents and guardians.

A survey was administered to 1,080 students in grades 3 through 12. Fifty classrooms in twenty-six schools joined the activity. The results showed that seven of eight students were aware of DATA LINE and that their primary information sources were posters, flyers and teachers' instructions. Ninety percent of the students surveyed said they did their homework during DATA LINE's operating hours. Twenty-five percent of the survey unit used DATA LINE, 50 percent of those reported one call. Eighty-four percent of the callers said the service helped them complete their homework.

During its operational hours, DATA LINE teachers used tally sheets to record each call. These tally sheets included space for recording the time of a call's arrival within a thirty minute span, the caller's status, student or parent, academic area, grade and if the call was answered or referred. These tally sheets remain in use today.

If the caller's question could not be answered, it was referred to the appropriate curriculum office. At this point, the caller's name and address were recorded in order to permit the curriculum specialist to make his contact. While the same option exists today, it has not been used.

After DATA LINE ended its service for the school year, a closure meeting was held. The participants included the DATA LINE teachers and representatives from the various curriculum and support offices. The teachers reported that their DATA LINE experience was rewarding and served as a worthwhile learning activity. One teacher added that a mutual support system had developed among DATA LINE staff because the teachers helped each other. Another teacher commented on the sophistication of some homework assignments and the lack of appropriate resources available to students: School libraries were closed at the school day's end and students were forced to leave school at the end of their classes. Thus, individuals were not allowed access to the resources which would be advantageous to them in completing their homework, nor could they discuss their assignments with their classmates in a comfortable, relaxed and convenient setting.

Publicity also concerned the DATA LINE teachers. In addition to posters, flyers and radio announcements, the DATA LINE teachers recommended that the DATA LINE telephone numbers be placed on classroom bulletin boards, report cards and announced on television. Pertinent information on DATA LINE could also be discussed in student council meetings, Home and School Association meetings and community activities. Relevant details could be provided to representatives from parochial and private schools who could advise their students of the service.

Evaluators observed DATA LINE on twelve occasions during the course of the 1979-80 school year and found that resource materials were available and calls were answered quickly, often by the second ring. A tally sheet was completed for each call and assistance for elementary school students was ususally given immediately. In a number of instances concerning secondary school students, assistance was delayed with a return call necessary on many occasions. Here, the secondary school subject DATA LINE teacher often had to

deal with involved or complex answers to callers' questions and was unable to respond to all calls immediately. In each case, however, a return call was made either later in the evening or on the following evening.

While answering a caller's question, the DATA LINE teacher moved at his caller's pace. The amount of time the teacher spent on the call varied and was left to the his discretion. For the most part, the DATA LINE teachers used a nondirective approach in their conversations, asking the caller, "What did the teacher say to you ?" or "How did the teacher do it in class ?" The evaluators described the teachers as spontaneous and reported that they focused on problem solving in their interactions with callers. To this end, the DATA LINE teachers explained procedures, provided basic information or expanded on their callers' ideas, reviewed, repeated and clarified steps, suggested sources for information, identified the location of useful reference materials and acknowledged their callers' efforts. The observations showed that the DATA LINE teachers communicated clearly with their callers.

As in the project's first full year of operation, an end of the year meeting was held in order to allow those concerned with DATA LINE to express their opinions and make suggestions for the upcoming year based on their experiences. The DATA LINE teachers claimed that classroom teachers' homework directions were often unclear, placing the student in a difficult position because the callers wanted to complete their assignments but were unable to determine what their teacher wanted. Students' textbook skills were described as weak, their ability to locate and use information, poor, and their ability to budget their time, limited. Some students reported that they were not allowed to take their books home from school. Their classroom teachers apparently made the assumption that appropriate reference materials were available in their students' homes. If this were not the case, students

trying to finish their homework lacked an important resource, their textbook. Some students told DATA LINE teachers that their classroom teachers told them to call DATA LINE if they could not complete their work.

In 1980-81 DATA LINE operated for 124 evenings, beginning on October 6 and ending on June 18. During this span, 27,954 calls were received, an average of 217 calls per evening. In the spring of 1981, the evaluation team and DATA LINE personnel conducted a telephone survey in order to identify the population which used DATA LINE's services and present their opinions of the service they received. The results showed that the typical DATA LINE user was a student who called weekly and was satisfied with the service provided. One-third of the callers came from homes where two or more students used DATA LINE.

A structured survey was administered to 2,715 students in grades 3 to 12 in thirty-eight schools. More than one hundred classrooms were represented in the sample. The findings showed that there was a need for DATA LINE services, that the services were offered at the proper time, and that roughly 20 percent of the students surveyed had called DATA LINE. The evaluation report contained no information pertaining to a year end meeting.

DATA LINE operated for 128 evenings during the 1981-82 school year and received 21,007 calls, an average of 164 calls per evening. In May, 1982, the DATA LINE teachers conducted a telephone survey in order to collect pertinent information. Here, students were asked for their telephone numbers and called afterwards. The results showed that a majority of the callers learned about DATA LINE from teachers, posters, flyers and bookmarks distributed by the project. About 25 percent reported that they learned of DATA LINE through telephone bill inserts, friends, the newspapers and television. Less than 10 percent of the respondents mentioned the note stamped on their report card. About one-third of the respondents stated that more than one person in their

home used DATA LINE. Virtually all of the callers were satisfied with the service they received from DATA LINE.

The School District did not support a telephone schoolwork assistance program during the 1982-83 or 1983-84 school years. It is beyond the scope of this report to determine the reason. Project HELP began operating in December, 1984, under Chapter 2 and functioned like DATA LINE. Later, Chapter 2 support was discontinued and TELLS (Testing for Essential Literacy and Learning Skills) funds were used to underwrite the project. TELLS is the Pennsylvania statewide assessment program. Results from this assessment are used to set the disbursement of state funds to school districts for academic remediation.

Project HELP was implemented as planned. Teachers assigned to Project HELP answered their telephones quickly, and provided their callers with the assistance they requested. Project HELP received 8,222 calls during its first year of operation, 7,482 in English and 740 in Spanish. Through the course of the year, Project HELP averaged ninety-seven calls an evening. In its final operating week, however, the average dropped to twenty-one calls per evening.

The average number of calls taken by Project HELP per evening was ninety-seven. In its final operating year, DATA LINE averaged 163 calls per evening. School personnel judged that the aggressive advertising campaign which supported DATA LINE may have been responsible for the larger call volume. While steps were taken to generate more publicity for Project HELP, the effort did not match that associated with its predecessor.

In 1985-86, Project HELP added a teacher who spoke a number of Asian languages in order to assist the growing numbers of Asian students enrolling in Philadelphia's schools. Asian students, however, made relatively little use of Project HELP's services, accounting for approximately 1 percent of the calls received.

The evaluation team conducted a survey designed to determine callers' satisfaction with Project HELP's services. Calls were made in the late afternoon and early evening and the survey cohort was limited to students enrolled in Philadelphia public schools whose name and telephone numbers were recorded by Project HELP teachers. While Project HELP teachers are asked to record the time a call is taken, the subject of interest and the caller's grade, anonymity on both sides of the call is maintained. However, if a call has to be returned, the student's first name and telephone number are noted. Two hundred sixty-three contacts were made.

The results showed that 111 (42 %) boys and 152 (58 %) girls made up the survey cohort. Thus, girls were more likely to call Project HELP than boys. In the grades, 195 (74 %) secondary school students (74 %) and sixty-eight elementary school students (26 %) were surveyed. Fifty-nine elementary school students (87 %) were enrolled in grades four through six. Thus, relatively few students in grades one through three called Project HELP and steps ought to be taken to determine the reason for this difference and, if necessary, attend to it. An overwhelming majority of the callers - 260 - said they called Project HELP because they were unable to finish their homework. The remaining three callers wanted help with reports.

Sixty-two percent of the respondents asked for help with mathematics. This percent is considerably higher than that derived from the tally sheets - 41 percent. Observations of Project HELP may explain this difference. Questions in mathematics seem to call for lengthy detailed explanations by the students and similar answers by the teacher. This pattern may occur more frequently in secondary mathematics than in elementary mathematics. Consequently, when a call arrives which requires the mathematics teacher's services, there is a strong possibility, that the teacher will be working with another student. Thus, the likelihood that the student's name and telephone

number will be increases, On some evenings, the number of callers asking for help in secondary mathematics is so great that return calls cannot be made until the following evening. Since inclusion in the survey cohort was based upon the student's telephone number, it is more likely that one seeking help in mathematics will be selected.

The respondents were asked if they received the help they needed. Two hundred forty-three (92 %) said they did and twenty (8 %) said they did not. The dissatisfied respondents said that the appropriate teacher was not available when they called, a point consistent with the earlier finding on secondary mathematics.

Many callers were frequent users of Project HELP. One hundred twenty-three callers (47 %) reported that they telephoned Project HELP more than once. When the respondents were asked how they learned about Project HELP, most said they were given small yellow stickers which displayed Project HELP's telephone number. The stickers were small enough to place on a telephone handset.

In the 1986-87 school year Project HELP operated for 127 evenings and received 16,528 calls. The average number of calls taken each evening was 130. Project HELP was observed by evaluators six times during the course of the school year. No year to year operational differences were noted.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the information collected in the DATA LINE and Project HELP evaluations. The recommendations could be used to set up a similar service in school districts which are studying telephone assistance programs. The literature on homework and its potential certainly

justifies studying means to help students complete their daily assignments and prepare reports.

1. The service is used by a relatively small proportion of the students who attend Philadelphia's public schools. We can only estimate the number of individuals who use the service because many callers ask for help two or more times each evening they call. Nevertheless, the service seems to be worthwhile because virtually all of the students who use it like it. In addition, students who attend local nonpublic schools, public schools beyond Philadelphia, and local colleges and universities also use the service.

2. An aggressive continuing promotional effort would probably encourage more students to use Project HELP. This promotional effort should include various approaches, radio and television announcements, newspaper advertisements, flyers, posters, giveaways and school and community participation. Businesses such as Bell Telephone, Philadelphia Electric and Philadelphia Gas Works could insert promotional material with their bills. These strategies worked for DATA LINE and could be renewed for Project HELP.

3. While Hispanic and Asian students have not availed themselves of Project HELP's service in line with their numbers in the past, this deficiency may be attributed to a lack of promotional activities in their communities rather than a lack of interest on the part of the students concerned. Through the course of the School District's homework assistance programs, the number of calls made by Hispanic and Asian students has accounted for about 10 percent of the volume. These students represent about 25 percent of the School District's student population. Promotional efforts directed toward these students ought to increase the number of calls they make to a proportion equivalent to their numbers.

4. Our surveys indicated that some assignments were unclear and teachers believed students could refer to information sources in their homes. Classroom

teachers must make sure that their homework assignments are explicit and that their students can access the resources necessary to complete their daily and long-term work. Although homework research is inconsistent, it is obvious that ambiguous assignments will not benefit students asked to complete work they can neither define nor research. Teachers must not assume that appropriate reference materials reside in students' homes and that assignments which require library work are given with enough lead time to allow their students to gather and work with the materials they need in order to complete their task.

5. Students are likely to ask questions in the areas of elementary and secondary mathematics. Since these questions tend to require more time than those set in other academic areas, teachers whose specialties are elsewhere, ought to have some familiarity with mathematics, particularly secondary mathematics. If this is the case, students whose questions do not deal with the more advanced concepts in secondary mathematics may be able to receive the help they need instantly rather than later. After all, the student who needs to solve a geometry problem for tomorrow's test will find tomorrow evening's assistance worthwhile in academic terms only.

You can call Project HELP at 215-627-HELP any Monday through Thursday when the Philadelphia Schools are in session. The teachers will be working from 5:00 PM to 8:00 PM Eastern Standard Time. Ask the teacher to answer a typical homework question. Let us know your opinion.

Table 1

Number of Calls and Number of Operating Evenings
DATA LINE and Project HELP

School Year	Number of Operating Evenings	Number of Calls	Average
1978-79	65	7,774	120
1979-80	136	26,645	200
1980-81	129	27,954	217
1981-82	128	21,007	164
1984-85	82	8,222	100
1985-86	118	13,507	114
1986-87	127	16,528	130

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